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EXPULLED RUSSIANS ARE TERMED SPIES

U.S. Sees Ouster of 25 at U.N. as Hurting K.G.B. Efforts

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Sept. 18 — Reagan Administration officials asserted today that the 25 members of the Soviet diplomatic staff at the United Nations who must leave by Oct. 1 are senior intelligence officers.

The officials, speaking to reporters at a White House briefing, said the ouster of the 25 would severely hurt what they said was Moscow's most important espionage outpost in this country.

The ouster order was announced Wednesday, and officials here said it was aimed at insuring that the Soviet Union complied with an order issued six months ago that it reduce its United Nations staff. White House and State Department officials denied Wednesday that it was in retaliation for the arrest of an American journalist.

'Rippling Effect on K.G.B.'

The journalist, Nicholas S. Daniloff of the magazine U.S. News & World Report, was arrested last month in what Washington said was clearly a retaliation for the arrest on espionage charges a week before of Gennadi F. Zakharov, a Soviet employee of the United Nations.

"This will have a rippling effect on the K.G.B. and the G.R.U. in New

York," one official said, referring to Soviet intelligence agencies. "If you take 25 of their senior officers, it's like putting your hand in their heart and ripping it out."

In New York, the chief Soviet delegate to the United Nations, Aleksandr M. Belonogov, warned of possible retaliation by his country if the decision was not reversed. "This kind of behavior cannot but provoke condemnation, nor can it remain without consequences," he said.

Traveling in Alabama, President Reagan said he was prepared for a

Soviet response. "I'm always ready," he said.

Earlier today, Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar contended that what his office regarded as a mass expulsion of diplomats was "incompatible" with the 1947 Headquarters Agreement. The pact sets out the legal relationship between the United States as host country and the other members of the United Nations.

A spokesman for the Secretary General said the Headquarters Agreement permits the expulsion of diplomats only in specific cases, when their identities and offenses have been specified.

Today, at the White House briefing, officials made the assertion that the 25 Soviet staff members who must leave

are intelligence officers. The Administration has also argued that it is acting under international law and that the Soviet Union's mission to the United Nations is larger than is needed to perform diplomatic functions.

John M. Pindexter, the President's national security adviser, said that "there's nothing in the agreement that sets the number of people" or gives any of the diplomats "the right to spy."

As of Oct. 1, the Soviet Union will be permitted 218 diplomats in its United Nations mission.

Aside from the mission, more than 300 Soviet nationals work for the United Nations Secretariat and do not hold diplomatic immunity. About 100 work for various other Soviet organizations in New York City with as many as 200 in New York on a temporary basis for the United Nations.

Six months ago, Mr. Reagan ordered the cut in the Soviet Mission from its total of 243. It was initially hoped that this reduction could be accomplished by attrition, without the expulsion of any Soviet diplomats.

One intelligence source said that as recently as early September, the Administration was prepared to let the Russians designate which diplomats would leave.

But the Russians refused to provide any names and instead challenged the legality of the reductions. At a news conference on Sept. 12, Mr. Belonogov declared that his country was not ready to comply.

The comments prompted policymakers in Washington to revise their approach and name the 25 diplomats viewed as most valuable to Moscow's intelligence-gathering efforts. It is the largest number of Soviet diplomats ever expelled from the United States at one time.

Mr. Belonogov contended today that the expulsions were unwarranted because the Soviet Union had already cut its staff to 205.

The State Department spokesman, Bernard Kalb, responded that the United States had counted more than 218 diplomats credited to the Soviet Mission.

Officials said the United States regarded any Soviet official with a validated visa as part of the mission whether he was in New York or not. They said many Soviet diplomats had been on home leave and were now returning. It is difficult, they said, to arrive at a precise count because Soviet diplomats do not inform the United States when they leave the country.

Administration officials have insisted publicly that the expulsion of the diplomats was not linked to the dispute over Mr. Zakharov, who was arrested after he received classified documents from a double agent. In response, the Soviet Union leveled parallel charges against Mr. Daniloff, who Administration officials said was entrapped by the K.G.B. to serve as a "hostage" in bargaining over Mr. Zakharov's fate.

Officials acknowledge privately that the anger over the Daniloff case gave support to the arguments of those Administration officials who have favored expelling Soviet intelligence officers at the United Nations.